



UN GLOBAL PULSE



SCALING THE SUMMIT

**How the United Nations can
expand promising ideas
to change the world**

Created by:

John Bessant, Ahmed El Saeed, Ian Gray and Patricia Loh

With support from:

Lauren Parater and Kitty McKinsey

Graphic design & illustrations by:

Ina Fiebig

This work was made possible by the generous support of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Nations sees innovation as one of the key ways it can transform itself into an institution that offers solutions for our increasingly challenging world. It is seeking to transform its internal operations and culture and the ways it helps promising ideas to emerge, develop and expand (scale) as widely as possible to help change the world.

The journey to scale may be well known in the business world, but for social innovators, those people and organisations that want to change the world, the path is less well trodden. There are bright spots of innovation within the United Nations; yet there are often chasms in moving from experimentation in labs to adoption by individual agencies, then to implementation by many agencies, and finally out to have a lasting impact in the wider world.

To help the United Nations bridge these chasms, this report reviews experience and practice in supporting social innovations along the journey to scale. It also looks at how UN Global Pulse (UNGP) might support innovators on this journey – how to accelerate adoption of proven successful innovation from a small group of early enthusiasts across to the mainstream – to take a revolutionary idea and make it commonplace.

UNGP is the United Nations Secretary-General's Innovation Lab. With a network of hubs around the world, it uses innovation to support the United Nations Secretary-General's ambitious new goals for the world. At UNGP, we cannot actually scale United Nations agencies' innovations, but can support their trek to the top, in much the same way sherpas help mountaineers reach the summit.

The report identifies a number of "pain points," or obstacles, on the journey to scale and suggests specific interventions to surmount these in a systematic way that results in a repeatable process for many teams.

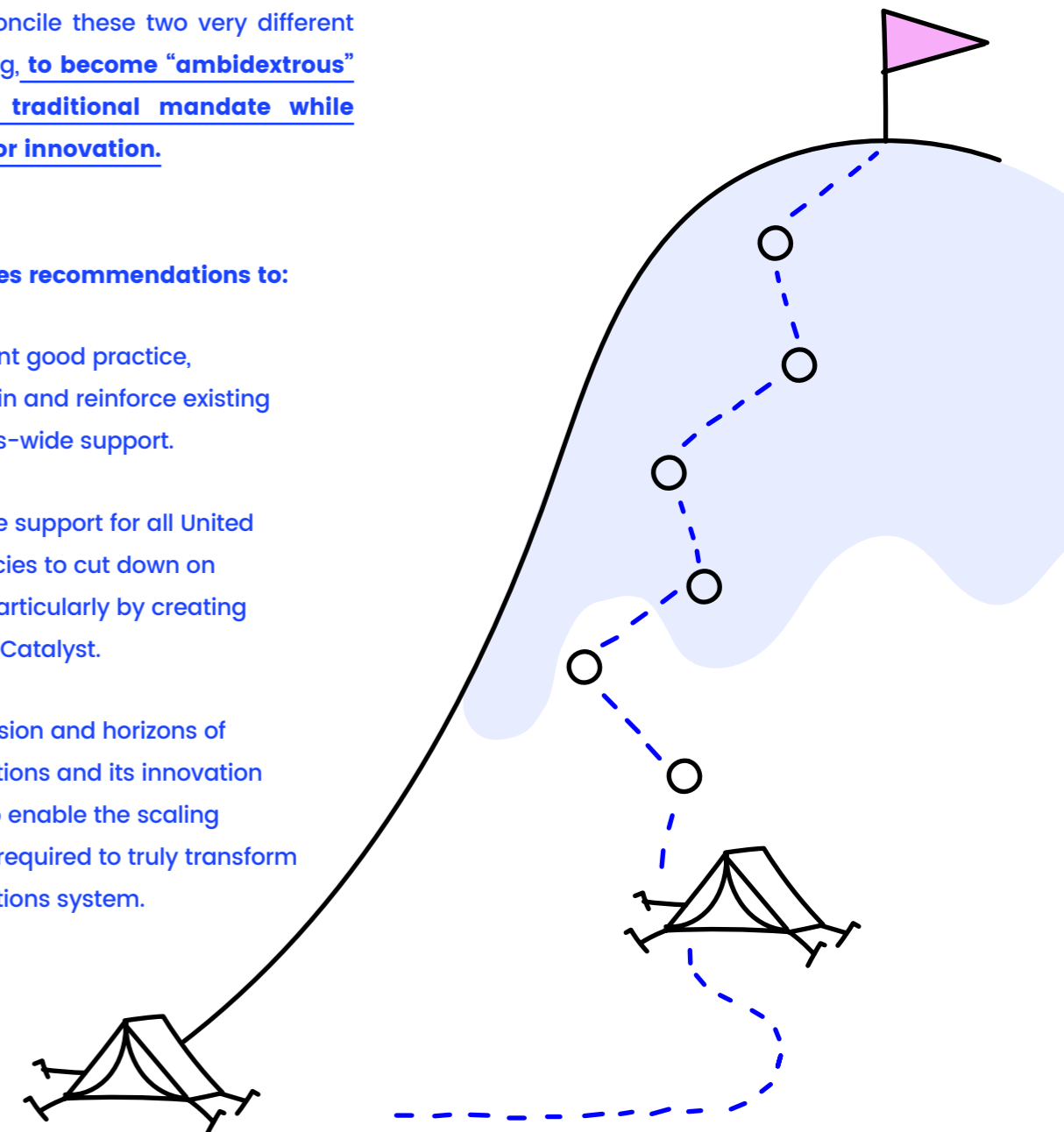
Suggested solutions include building on the experience of some United Nations agencies to develop a scale strategy, to use tools to assess scale readiness, ensure teams have the right mix of skills and to mentor and coach them all along the journey. More flexible funding, partnership networks and better metrics for monitoring and evaluation are also important.

To truly make these changes effective, the context in which innovators work also has to change. The United Nations procedures are designed to ensure safe, ethical and reliable delivery of emergency aid, to support devel-

opment, to stand up for human rights, and to promote peace and security and the rule of law. They are not designed to provide the very different framework needed for innovation in general and scaling in particular. This report suggests several ways that the United Nations can reconcile these two very different ways of operating, to become "ambidextrous" in fulfilling its traditional mandate while making space for innovation.

This report makes recommendations to:

- **Deepen** current good practice, further invest in and reinforce existing United Nations-wide support.
- **Broaden** scale support for all United Nations agencies to cut down on duplication, particularly by creating a UNGP Scale Catalyst.
- **Expand** the vision and horizons of the United Nations and its innovation capabilities to enable the scaling of innovation required to truly transform the United Nations system.



1

THE CHALLENGE OF SCALING INNOVATION

THE CHALLENGE OF SCALING INNOVATION

If you've ever stored leftovers, you may know Earl Tupper, whose patented Tupperware has become synonymous with airtight plastic food-storage containers. Similarly, every time you Hoover or vacuum a floor, you can thank James M. Spangler, who patented a "suction sweeper" way back in 1908.

But the world almost did not hear about their life-transforming inventions. Tupper, an American businessman, patented his first Tupperware products in 1947. Although described by *House Beautiful* magazine as "fine art for 39 cents," the products, with their patented "burp" closure, failed to sell in quantity.

Moving from evidence to adoption What Tupper faced was the age-old innovation problem of moving to scale, the challenge of moving from evidence to adoption that causes so much innovation to fail.

That was something Spangler knew only too well. An asthmatic with the unfortunate job of department store sweeper, he cobbled together a tin box, pillowcase, electric fan, and a broom handle into something resembling a crude vacuum cleaner to bring relief from all the dust clouds produced by his work. However, it was only when he sold his patent to William Hoover that the home vacuum cleaner was born. In the 1920s, it was so successful in the UK that to this day most British people refer to vacuuming as "hoovering."

In their day, Tupperware and the Hoover may have been the best thing since sliced bread – but even Otto Rohrwedder, inventor of the first automatic bread-slicing machine, nearly went bankrupt trying to perfect his revolutionary idea.

Obstacles in making a greater impact

If many start-ups fail in the early stages, a bigger challenge exists in expanding the use of an innovation as widely as possible, a process called scaling. Even innovations that have had a successful pilot launch face huge obstacles in making a greater impact. Just peek inside the [Museum of Failure](#), a travelling exhibition that started life in Sweden in 2017 and which showcases innovations, many by major corporations, that were spurned by consumers.

Mandy Haberman faced many challenges of parenthood and her experience led her to develop several successful innovations to help make her life – and that of other parents around the world – easier. After inventing the Haberman Feeder to improve feeding of babies with impaired suckling abilities, she came up with her second major invention – the Anyway-up® cup – a simple modification of a toddler's drinking cup which would prevent spillage and hence lots more washing of clothes. It found a ready market; within 18 months of trading, her cups were stocked in major supermarket chains and had a 40 percent market share in the United Kingdom. However, a former market leader soon launched an infringing product, slashing Haberman's sales overnight. She was faced with a decision: either give up the commercial success, or defend her intellectual property. Haberman decided on the latter – and won – and successfully secured her product's ability to scale.



For Tupper, Spangler and Rohrwedder, success came only with many refinements of the original idea and considerable help from partners and collaborators. Their problem was relatively simple – how to grow their market. But for social innovators – people and organisations that want to change the world – the stakes are much higher.

Moving from proven success to something that creates real and lasting impact

In this report, we at UN Global Pulse (UNGP), the United Nations Secretary-General's Innovation Lab, with a network of innovation hubs supporting the Secretary-General's ambitious new goals for the world, look at how innovations can move from proven success at a pilot level to something that creates real and lasting impact. Would-be innovators already have at their disposal extensive guidance about how to launch and pilot, but considerably less when they want to embark on the next stage, the journey to scale.

To fill this gap, this report, based on interviews with 33 people inside and outside the United Nations (for more on methodology see Annex 1), reviews what we know about the journey to scale, and looks at how we might support innovators on this journey. UNGP cannot actually scale United Nations agencies' innovations, but we support the scaling journey. To continue the mountaineering metaphor, perhaps we can be the sherpa to help innovation teams reach the summit.

For social innovators to succeed in improving services like education, healthcare and shelter, they not only need to sell their proven innovation widely, but they will also need to work with governments, donors, non-governmental organisations and others.

¹ See ['Cash programming in humanitarian innovation' case study](#)

Think of the long journey of cash assistance from a radical idea to an accepted humanitarian and development tool for improving peoples' lives. Thirty years ago, it was revolutionary to suggest giving cash instead of food rations to refugees and others. In the 1980s, this approach proved to be cheaper than the process of procuring, transporting and delivering food itself, and of course let people buy their preferred foods in local markets. Successful pilot projects showed the model worked, but it took much longer to convince the big players in aid delivery that cash transfers were a serious alternative.¹

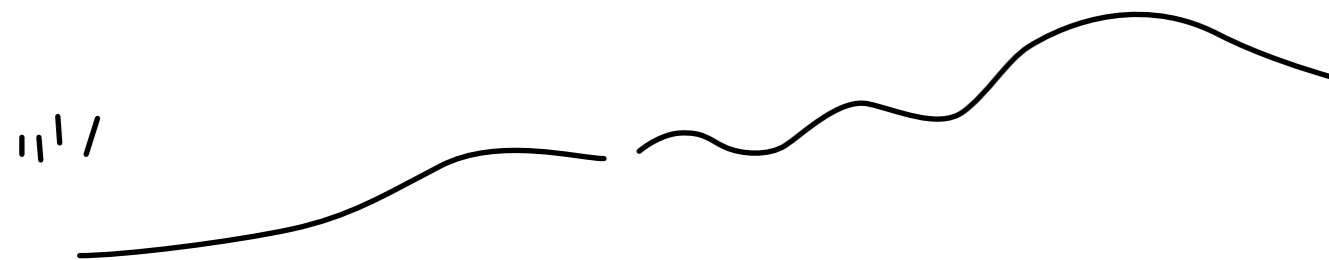
Or take Muhammad Yunus, hailed as the founder of micro-credit. Using his own money to help Bangladeshi women too poor to get a bank loan, in 1976, Yunus proved the concept that women would use the money wisely and would support each other in repaying the loans. In 1983, he founded Grameen Bank to expand his work to alleviate poverty and empower the poor through microcredit.

Although Yunus went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, his original idea took 10 years to make the short journey across the border from Bangladesh to India, and a further 24 years to be widely accepted around the world. The success of Grameen's microfinance model inspired some 78 microfinance institutions that now serve nearly 10 million active borrowers – but it's been a long and arduous journey to reach this point.

So, how to accelerate adoption of proven successful innovation from a small group of early enthusiasts across to the mainstream, to take a revolutionary idea and make it commonplace?

We can draw inspiration from American agricultural scientist George Washington Carver, a former slave who pioneered crop rotation to help poor Southern farmers rejuvenate soil depleted by cotton planting. He spent decades urging farmers to plant sweet potatoes, soybeans and other legumes. He tirelessly collected, invented and distributed hundreds of recipes to popularize these replacement crops.

He created more than 300 products from peanuts and was at times ridiculed for his passion for the humble groundnut. But he was so successful that now he's popularly credited for something he did not invent – peanut butter.





The journey to scale

Twists and turns, roadblocks and detours Unlike cartoons, where a lightbulb goes on over the inventor's head when inspiration strikes, innovation makes a long journey fraught with twists and turns, roadblocks and detours before it reaches the destination of delivering value.

Search gives way to ideation – the formation of ideas or concepts – then to selecting the best among many promising ideas and finally implementation. At the outset, would-be innovators get extensive guidance to reach the launch and pilot stages. But the longest stretch of the journey leads through uncharted territory, with considerably fewer signposts pointing the way to the summit – the place where innovations become widespread and have real impact.

Support for innovation similarly concentrates on the first steps. Because we understand the outset so well, there are many proven pathways to help start-ups hone their ideas. Going through a lean start-up process helps minimise wasteful activity and keeps the focus on what's most important to create value for a target market.² Bootcamps, incubators, sandpits and hackathons all offer a structure that has created many success stories. The accompanying funding structure emphasises staged models of development that allow early ideas the space to flourish but imposing stricter criteria as they move towards launch.

What has the United Nations learned about the second part of the journey? This paper suggests some solutions to these well-known problems, drawing together experiences to spotlight how best to support the push to the summit.

² Ries, E, *The Lean Startup: How Today's Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses* (Crown, New York, 2011).



“It’s not an easy task to take good products and services to scale in the development context... It’s important to research this question so we can understand better the options and develop services so innovators can work towards scaling.”

— Senior manager, donor funding agency

2

WHY IS SCALING SO DIFFICULT?

WHY IS SCALING SO DIFFICULT?

Opportunities and challenges Many have researched the difficulties of scaling social innovations to achieve impact. Issues include “perpetual pilots,” whether social innovations are “too tough to scale” and even the suggestion that successful innovation is achieved “against the odds.”³ Accordingly, much research has been done to explore possible ways to surmount these obstacles.

This research examines the opportunities and challenges faced by the United Nations system in accelerating scale and the widespread adoption of innovations to the desired level.

“For us scaling has a certain definition. ...It includes having the potential to at least reach a hundred thousand people but our goal is a million (and) also to work in x amount of countries.”

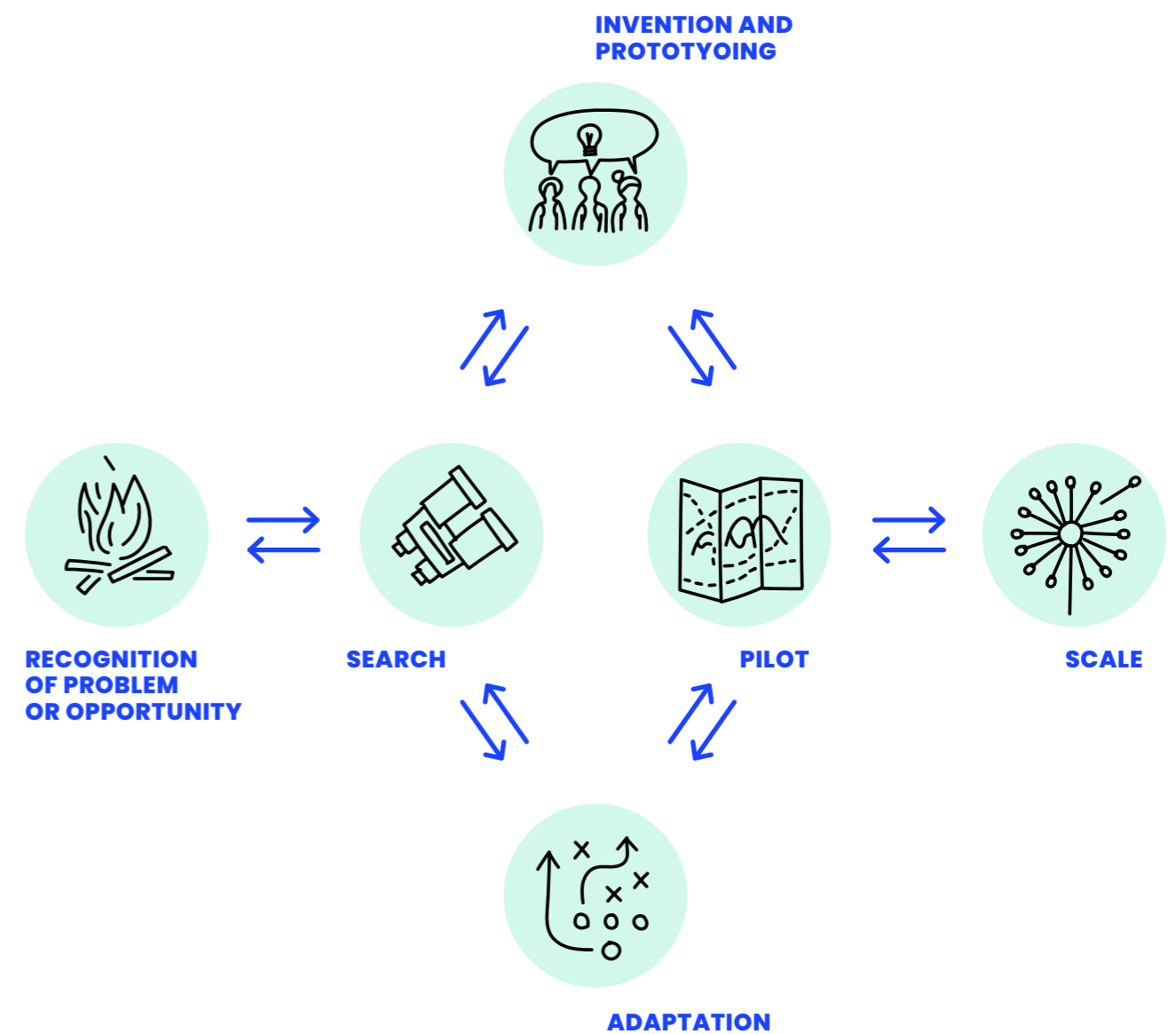
— Head of United Nations agency accelerator

In the commercial world, the focus is on the comparatively simple challenge of replication and spread. Companies want to scale up and out — to move innovations to a bigger market or new geographical territories. But things are more complex in the world of social innovation. As one senior manager at a donor funding agency told us, the “pathways are perhaps different from those of purely commercial products and services.” Social innovation brings into the process many stakeholders who all need to have the same interest in creating value at scale.

A common feature of both social and commercial innovations is that they do not remain the same over their lifetime. Many researchers have noted that what is being adopted and diffused may well change as a result of that process.⁴ As an innovation scales, it may remain largely in its original form, it may be optimised to improve along the original design trajectory, or it may be significantly modified to add new functions. It will almost certainly undergo adaptations to match different contexts, and after a sustained period of use, may give rise to major new generations of the innovation.

³ For examples of relevant research reports: [ELRHA, “Too tough to scale?”, 2019](#) / [Gabriel, M., “Making it big: Strategies for scaling social innovations”, Nesta, 2014](#) / [Hartmann, A and Linn, J.F., “Scaling up: A framework and lessons for development effectiveness from literature and practice”, Brookings Institute, 2008](#) / [Horton, T., “Against the odds: Successfully scaling innovation in the NHS”, The Health](#)

Example of an innovation process:



Infographic adapted from the [Elrha Humanitarian Innovation Guide](#)

[Foundation, 2018](#) / [McClure, D and others, “Humanitarian innovation: Untangling the many paths to scale”, Global Alliance for Humanitarian Innovation \(GAHI\), 2018](#) / [UNICEF Office of Innovation, “Scaling for sustainability”, 2019](#)

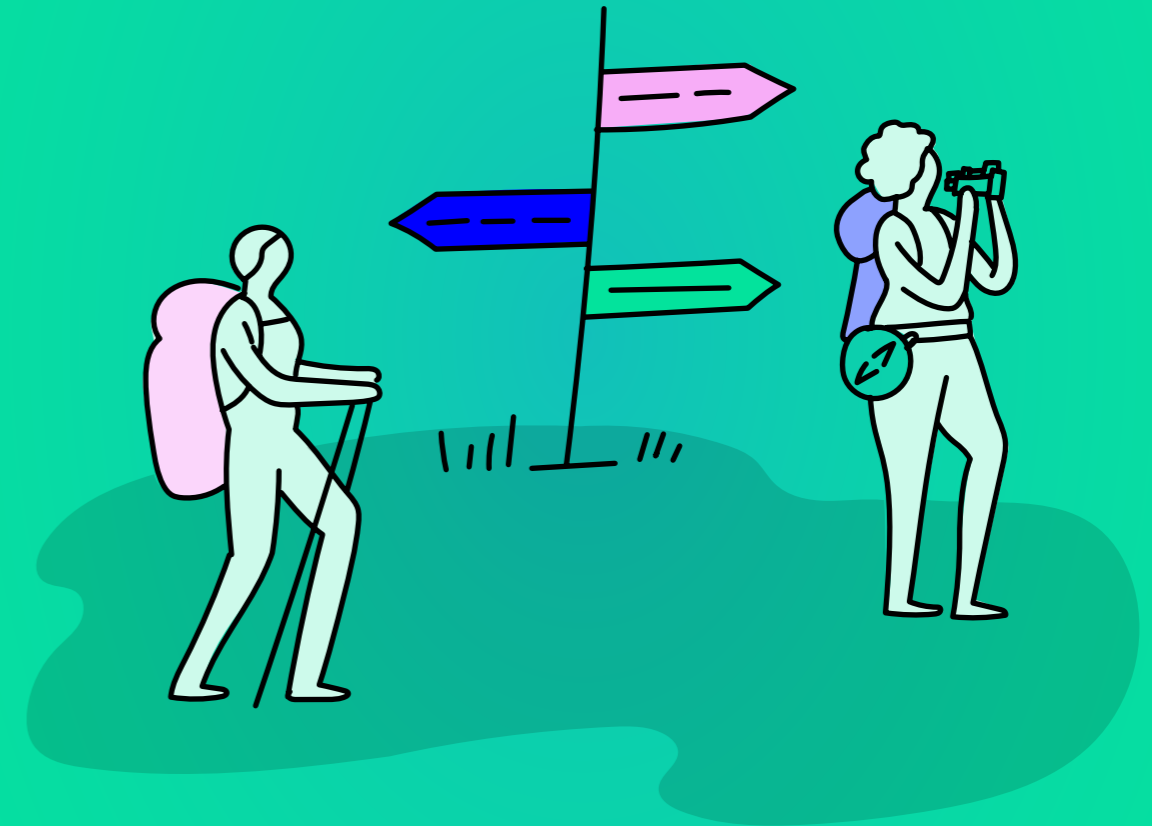
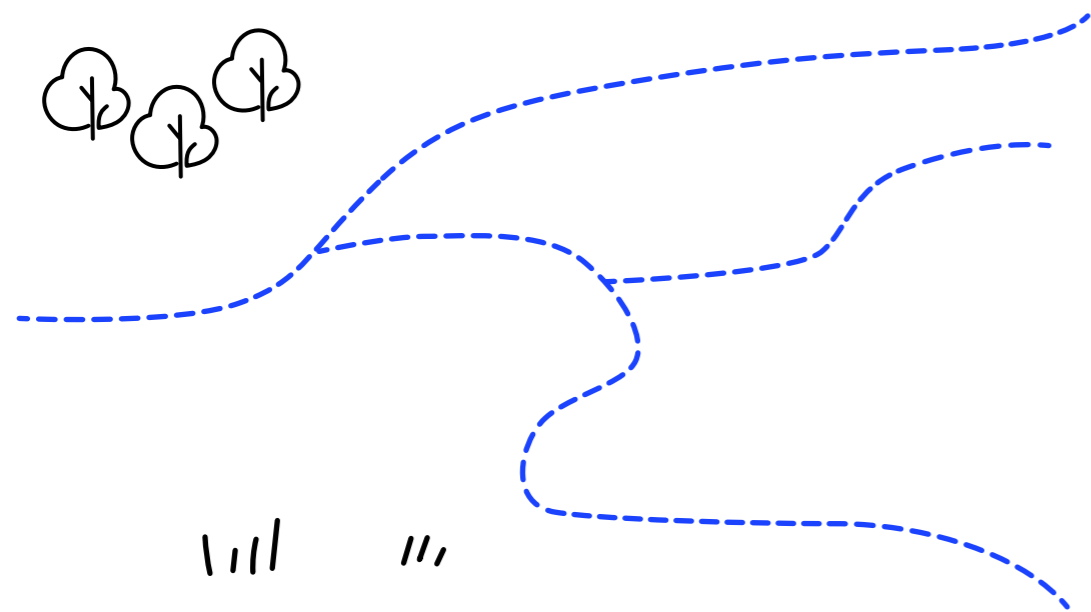
⁴ Fleck, J, “Learning by trying”, *Research Policy*, vol. 23 (1994), pp. 637–652. / Rosenberg, N, *Inside the black box: Technology and economics*, (Cambridge University Press, 1982). / Tidd, J and Bessant, J, *Managing innovation*, 7th ed. (John Wiley and Sons, New Jersey, 2019).

WHY IS SCALING SO DIFFICULT?

Many potential journeys with many different players

This means there is not a single pathway to scale, but many potential journeys involving different players.⁵ Innovations can be scaled with different degrees of control over how they are sustained in the long run. This ranges from selling an innovation through franchising and licensing to, at the other extreme, releasing the innovation as open source that allows others to modify and use it however they wish.⁶

Different pathways require collaboration with many different stakeholders, and it is obvious no one solution will respond to every challenge. But clearly the only way innovation will have far-reaching impact is if it moves to scale.



⁵ See United Nations Sustainable Development Group, Lucarelli, G., "Innovation scaling: It's not replication. It's seeing in 3D", 2018.

⁶ For example, see UNICEF Office of Innovation, Accone, T., "Scaling innovation for every child", 2019

Are we in shape to scale?

Scaling is a long expedition That journey calls for considerable preparation. Scaling involves more complexity than the start-up stages and calls for more complementary assets and partnerships. Based on their experience with the Innovation Accelerator, the World Food Programme (WFP) have learned that ‘scale starts before you scale’ is an important message for any innovation team embarking on the journey.

Scaling is not a weekend hike, but a long expedition. Unfortunately, innovation teams are often overwhelmed by the considerable adaptation they must do to their pilots. They may not have the time or energy to examine in depth the extra challenges expected with scaling.



Common obstacles Our interviews with innovators show there are some common obstacles on the scaling journey where teams may stumble, and where support is needed. Among these are:

- Innovations may be viable solutions to local or specific problems but are not inherently scalable.
- The team that develops the innovation from start-up to launch does not always have the skills or enthusiasm for leading the next stage.
- The team does not always have the right skills, experience or money to easily move to scale.
- There is either not enough funding – or not enough flexible funding – to cover demands of moving to scale. In a system where much funding is earmarked for specific planned activities, scaling innovation requires flexible funding that can adapt to the uncertainty, pivots and adaptation inherent in scaling.
- Early adopters of innovations often fail to influence the majority of other potential adopters across agencies and institutions, possibly because of the characteristic differences between innovators and adopters.
- Innovators may lack the skills to accomplish the tricky feat of moulding disparate actors with differing visions or goals into a support network and transforming it into a functioning ecosystem.
- For some social impact innovations, developing a sustainable and scalable business model can be challenging.

“Funding could be a little bit more responsive to opportunities and not so rigid sometimes.”

– United Nations agency senior manager

“I doubt that all of the UN entities have the capacity to look at these issues themselves, so indeed, there could be some kind of system-wide support to look at scaling practices in the UN and in other organisations.”

— Head of United Nations agency accelerator

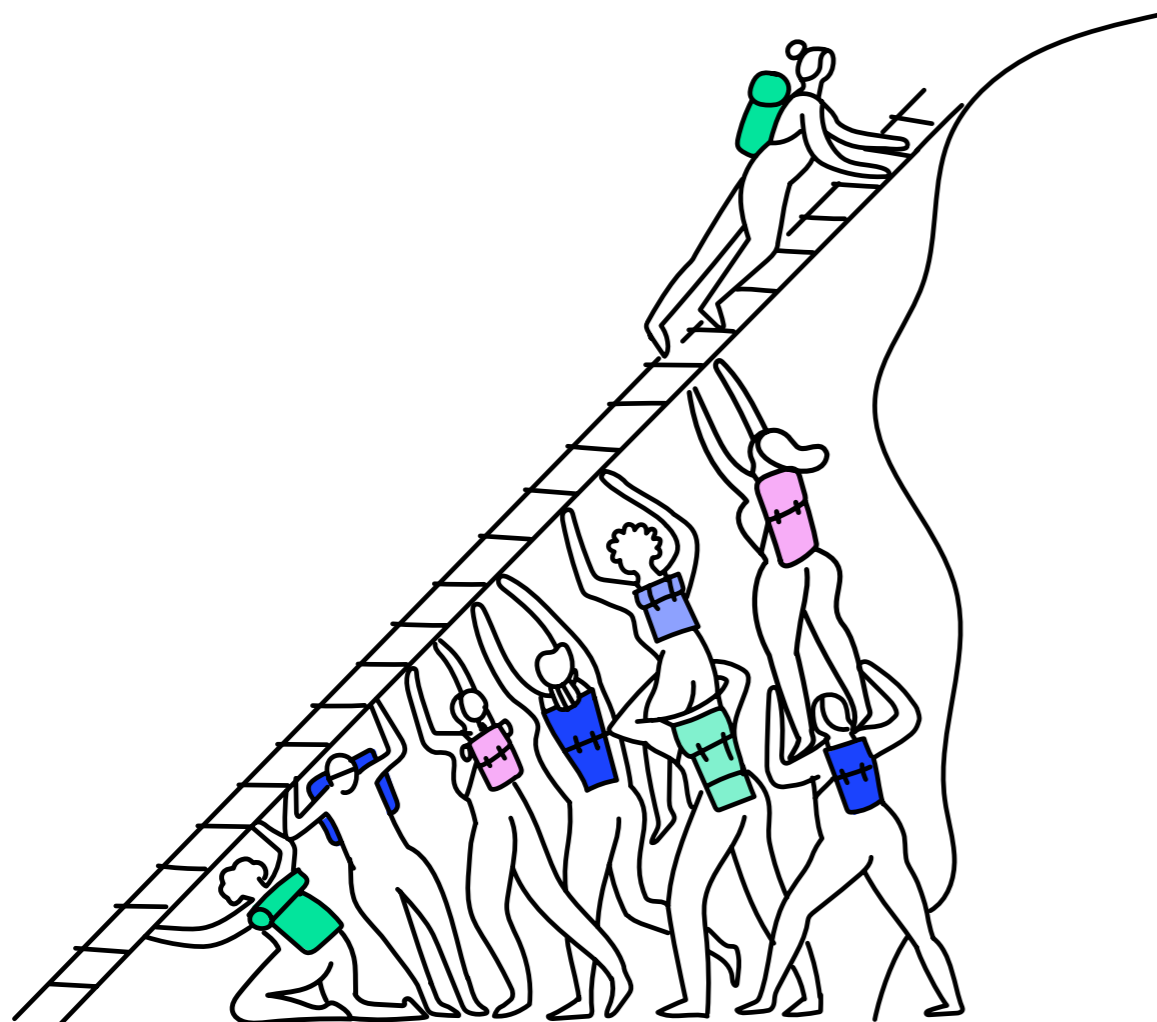
3

SUPPORT TO SCALE INNOVATION

SUPPORT TO SCALE INNOVATION

A range of tools So, what can be done to help innovation teams complete the expedition to the summit? They need help to surmount the obstacles identified above, and they need to establish a repeatable process that can be used by many different innovation teams.

United Nations agencies have developed a range of tools to meet the first challenge and help surmount obstacles along the journey. The following are common challenges in innovation scaling and examples of how some United Nations agencies have addressed them:



Challenges in scaling innovation

Developing a scale strategy, including a viable business model with a long-term staged approach to scale.

Using tools and techniques to assess scale readiness, to review what's been achieved and to stress-test the solution to make sure it really can be implemented widely.

Designing and delivering a variety of specific targeted inputs to address key questions like marketing and intellectual property.

Ensuring teams have the right mix of skills and that members work well together.

Mentoring and coaching team members at all stages.

Providing flexible funding that allows for experimentation and pivoting, but also includes criteria that demonstrate progress to the next stage and release of further funding.

Helping teams find and build partnership networks.

Using more appropriate metrics for monitoring and evaluation.

Examples of solution / actions within the United Nations system

Several agencies have contributed to developing the [UN Innovation Toolkit](#) which includes key resources around strategy and business model development.

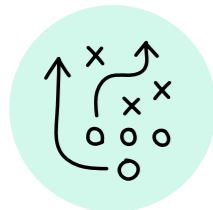
Several agencies have their own training inputs – for example [WFP](#), the [United Nations Children's Fund \(UNICEF\)](#), and [United Nations System Staff College \(UNSSC\)](#) are developing a range of courses to support innovation.

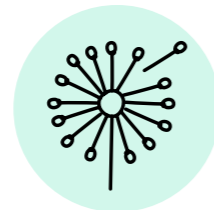
[WFP](#), [UNICEF](#) and others bring in consultants to help teams develop.

The [United Nations Population Fund \(UNFPA\) Equalizer Accelerator fund](#) or the [WFP support funding within its Innovation Accelerator](#) programme.

Donor agency Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH has worked with UNICEF to help enable [drone delivery of vaccines in Africa](#).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has focused on the question in its [Humanitarian Education Accelerator \(HEA\)](#).

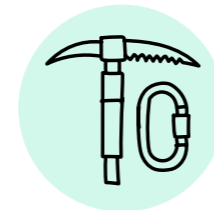
**Innovation
scaling needs:**

**SCALING
STRATEGY**

**SCALING
TEAM**

**SCALE READINESS
AND A SCALEABLE
SOLUTION**

**FLEXIBLE
FUNDING**

**STRUCTURED
PROCESS AND
ROADMAP**

**EXTENSIVE
MENTORING
OVER TIME**

**TECHNICAL
KNOWLEDGE AND
RESOURCE INPUTS**

**SUPPORT FOR
FINDING, FORMING
AND BUILDING
A PERFORMING
ECOSYSTEM**

It makes sense to create an environment in which such measures can be integrated into scaling support, rather than offering them piecemeal. Creating a system for scaling allows groups of innovators to learn from each other so that the most useful support elements can be built into the operating structure.

Whether they are called accelerator, catapult or lab, they all provide a structured environment that delivers support to innovation teams. They are valuable because they create innovation routines that allow behaviour patterns that work as experiments to become systematically embedded in processes, policies and structures.

Examples The [WFP Innovation Accelerator](#) is an example of such a structured environment. Set up in 2014 to support promising innovation ideas, it has pivoted and adapted many times as it built on what it had learned about how to best support innovation teams on their journey to scale. It now has codified processes for selection, and staged funding allocation for steps along the journey. It also has tools to surmount many of the obstacles identified above, such as targeted mentoring, ways to assess team suitability and methods for building networks.

UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, similarly has established a clear process for scaling, which begins with selection of projects and then offers support designed for each stage.⁷ The UNICEF model was built on insights from the International Development Innovation Alliance (IDIA) as well as on extensive research on the experience of different models.⁸

The United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, has an ambitious network of [Accelerator Labs](#). Much of its focus has been on supporting the "front end" of innovation incubation and start-up. But its programme also features a "grow stage" to scale up innovation, and UNDP used its experience to publish a [Strategy to Scale Innovation for Development toolkit](#) in 2020 to support scaling. Its aim is to source promising ideas as widely as possible and to create the structured framework through which they can accelerate.

⁷ For more information, see: [UNICEF Office of Innovation, "Accelerate to scale"](#). (Accessed on 17.1.2023)

⁸ IDIA, ["Insights on scaling innovation"](#), 2017.

Other United Nations bodies are also experimenting. The World Health Organization (WHO) is exploring scaling work as part of its [Innovation Hub](#) initiative. The United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency, UNFPA, has launched an [Equalizer Fund](#) that, in parallel with its [Innovation Fund](#), provides structured support for pilot and scaling activities. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) worked with UNICEF in 2016 on a [Humanitarian Education Accelerator \(HEA\)](#) and has continued the programme with a second cohort. The International Fund for Agricultural Development, IFAD, has also worked extensively on models for supporting start-up and scale-up.⁹

Outside the United Nations system, similar work is going on to support social innovation – for example, within [Elrha's Humanitarian Innovation Fund](#),¹⁰ the [USAID Center for Innovation and Impact \(CII\)](#) or inside the German development fund Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.¹¹

⁹ IFAD, "IFAD's operational framework for scaling up results", 2015

¹⁰ See also Taylor, A, "Navigating the journey to scale: can a strategy really make a difference?", Elrha, 2021

¹¹ For more information, see: BMZ digilab, "Solving global problems through local digital innovation in the BMZ digilab", 2022

Create a supportive structure for innovation

"The incentives are not for risk-taking, not to rock the boat, not to put yourself out there in any way. There's not a premium for innovation."

– United Nations Resident Coordinator

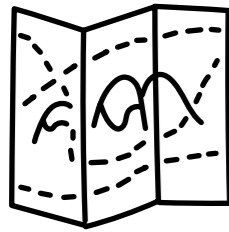
Innovation demands a different culture from the "business as usual" delivery of United Nations agencies. Large organisations have wrestled with this challenge for decades. They know there is an inherent conflict between the kind of organisation needed to support operational delivery and the one needed to create an entrepreneurial environment in which innovation can flourish.

For agencies to build both cultures of reliable delivery **and** experimentation, they must offer incentives for innovation. Top management could encourage experimentation to facilitate entrepreneurial activity and ease the uncertain journey to scale. Staff members may be given the time or physical space to work on innovation and be exposed to new people and ideas.

Like ambidextrous people who can write equally well with either hand, organisations need to learn to operate in two complementary but different modes. It should be possible to support both operations **and** innovation.¹²

Organisations aiming for ambidexterity recognise the strategic importance of innovation, and dedicate a portion of their strategic resources to enabling it. This can take a number of forms. Some organisations set up internal entrepreneurial units or corporate venturing environments which operate with a different culture, often in a different location from the mainstream. For this approach to work, it's important to regularly rotate employees through these environments so they do not become isolated islands of innovation.

¹² See, for example, Tushman, ML and O'Reilly, CA, *Winning through Innovation: A Practical Guide to Leading Organizational Change and Renewal* (Harvard Business Press, Cambridge, 2002).



Another approach is to signal a top-level commitment to innovation through policies that encourage employees to spend a percentage of their time on innovative activities not directly linked to their regular work. Google’s famous “20% time” rule encourages employees to spend 20 percent of their working hours on creative endeavours they think will most benefit Google. Founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page attribute significant advances like AdSense, Google News and Gmail to this enabling climate and the strong incentive to innovate.

Encouraging enthusiastic and imaginative employees to develop, launch and scale their ideas

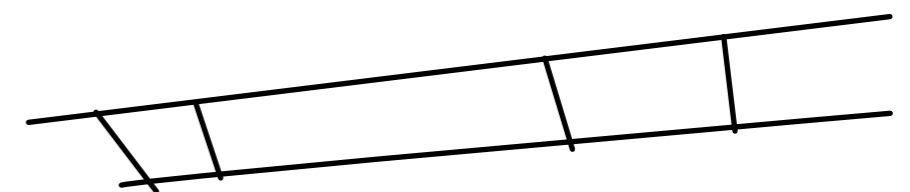
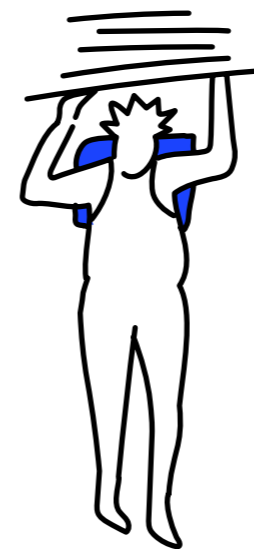
Still others encourage internal entrepreneurship – intrapreneurship – by encouraging enthusiastic and imaginative employees to develop, launch and scale their ideas. Widely-used collaboration platforms – the great-grandchildren of the original suggestion box – do more than simply harvest employees’ good ideas. They foster cooperation across silos, keep teams from unintentionally duplicating each other’s work and encourage high participation in conversations about innovation. Of course, whether employees actually have an entrepreneurial attitude depends on both recruitment and workforce development policies.¹³

An innovation culture is built not on one single measure, but on a combination of the above elements. For an example from the private sector, take 3M, with its approach of “We tried. We failed. We tried something new. Repeat cycle.” Innovation and perseverance have been hallmarks of the company from its small-scale beginnings in 1902 into a now well-known global company.¹⁴

¹³ On how collaboration platforms can help spur innovation, see: Bessant, J, “The suggestion box strikes back...”, 2022

¹⁴ For more on the 3M approach, see: Gundling, E, The 3M way to innovation: Balancing people and profit, (Kodansha International, New York, 2000).

3M encourages intrapreneurship alongside the mainstream delivery of products. It runs internal innovation funds to support projects from incubation through prototyping to launch and scaling. Its 15 percent policy, which inspired Google’s similar approach, is part of an integrated innovation system that sends the signal to employees around the world that top management thoroughly supports innovation. Not only do innovators have incentives that encourage them to take their ideas forward, but those innovators who manage to bring a product to scale get to run their businesses with full operational autonomy. Art Fry, for example, co-inventor of the ubiquitous Post-it Note, became CEO of his own division and ran it for nearly 30 years.



Crossing the valley of death

All of this points to the need for mechanisms to embed innovation in the overall organisation and not to be confined to a series of successful but separate satellite operations. However, once pilot projects demonstrate potential, far too many organisations struggle to transfer those ideas back into a mainstream culture that will continue to support them.

Bridge the gap between successful concept research and scaling

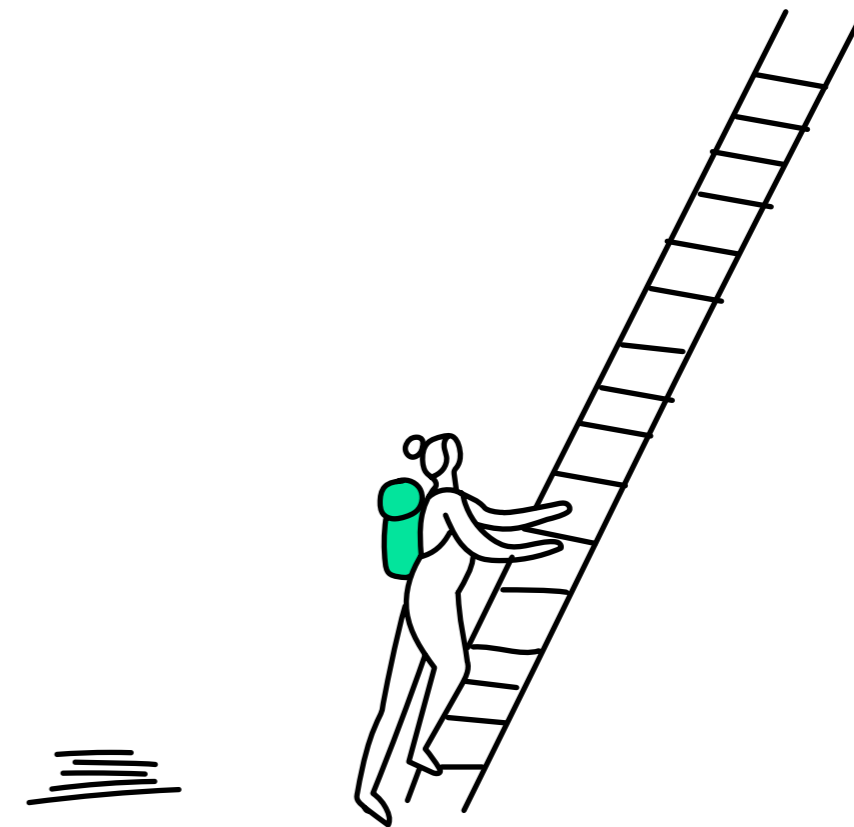
The business world knows the “Valley of Death” challenge, where progress and funding stall even after successful research and development. It takes time (and a lot more money) to bridge the gap between successful concept research on one side and scaling that leads to widespread adoption on the other. Sometimes promising candidate innovations fail to generate sufficient support and traction within the parent organisation to continue to scale and die in the valley.¹⁵

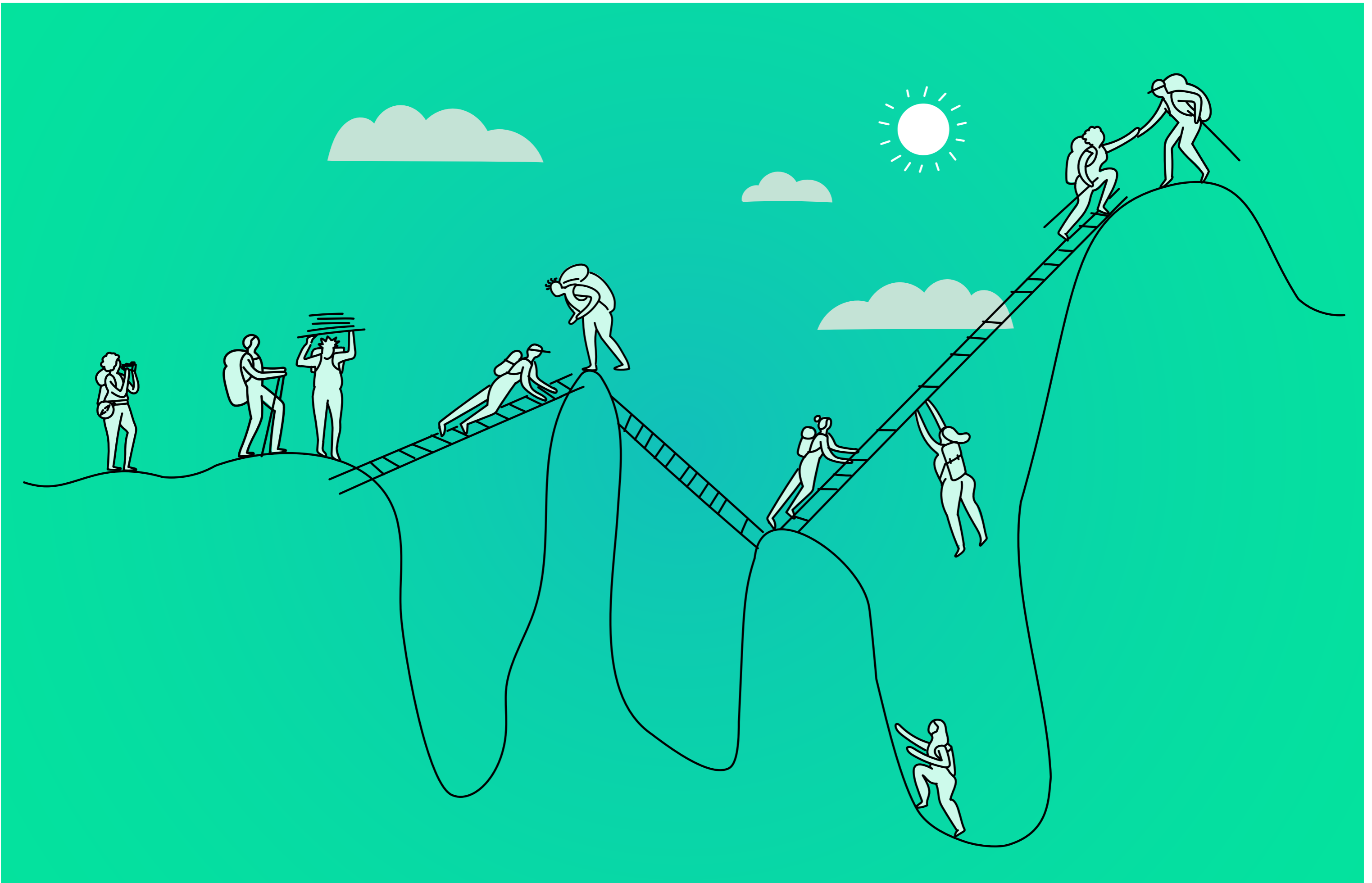
Bridging this chasm calls for the innovation team to champion its own ideas, but the team needs encouragement to diffuse the ideas into the mainstream. For this to happen regularly, there must be enabling structures and processes. This is the challenge for large organisations like the United Nations: to build a bridge between the innovation world and the mainstream delivery world and to keep the traffic flowing smoothly across the bridge. Although daunting, this is a significant link in the journey to scaling because adoption into the mainstream opens up the possibility of replicating and diffusing innovation widely around the world and through United Nations agencies and programmes with vastly different mandates.

¹⁵ For more on this challenge see: Skillicorn, N, [“The Innovation Valley of Death”](#), 2021 / Rossini, A, [“Bridging the technological valley of death”](#), PwC Norway, 2018 / Markham, S and Mugge, P, [Traversing the Valley of Death: A practical guide for corporate innovation leaders](#), (New York, 2014).

Some clues for who can construct that bridge can come from the private sector, and be adapted for the United Nations context. Anglo-Dutch oil giant Royal Dutch/ Shell, for example, discovered that organisations need much more than permission to innovate. They also need a process to validate and fund promising ideas. Shell developed a cadre of people known as Game Changers to organise the process of identifying and enabling promising and scalable innovations and linking them to top level support.

Another model is BT Group plc, formerly British Telecom, that requires board level executives to act as “godparents” who coach innovation teams on how to bring their solutions to the board’s attention and help smooth the path to mainstream adoption.

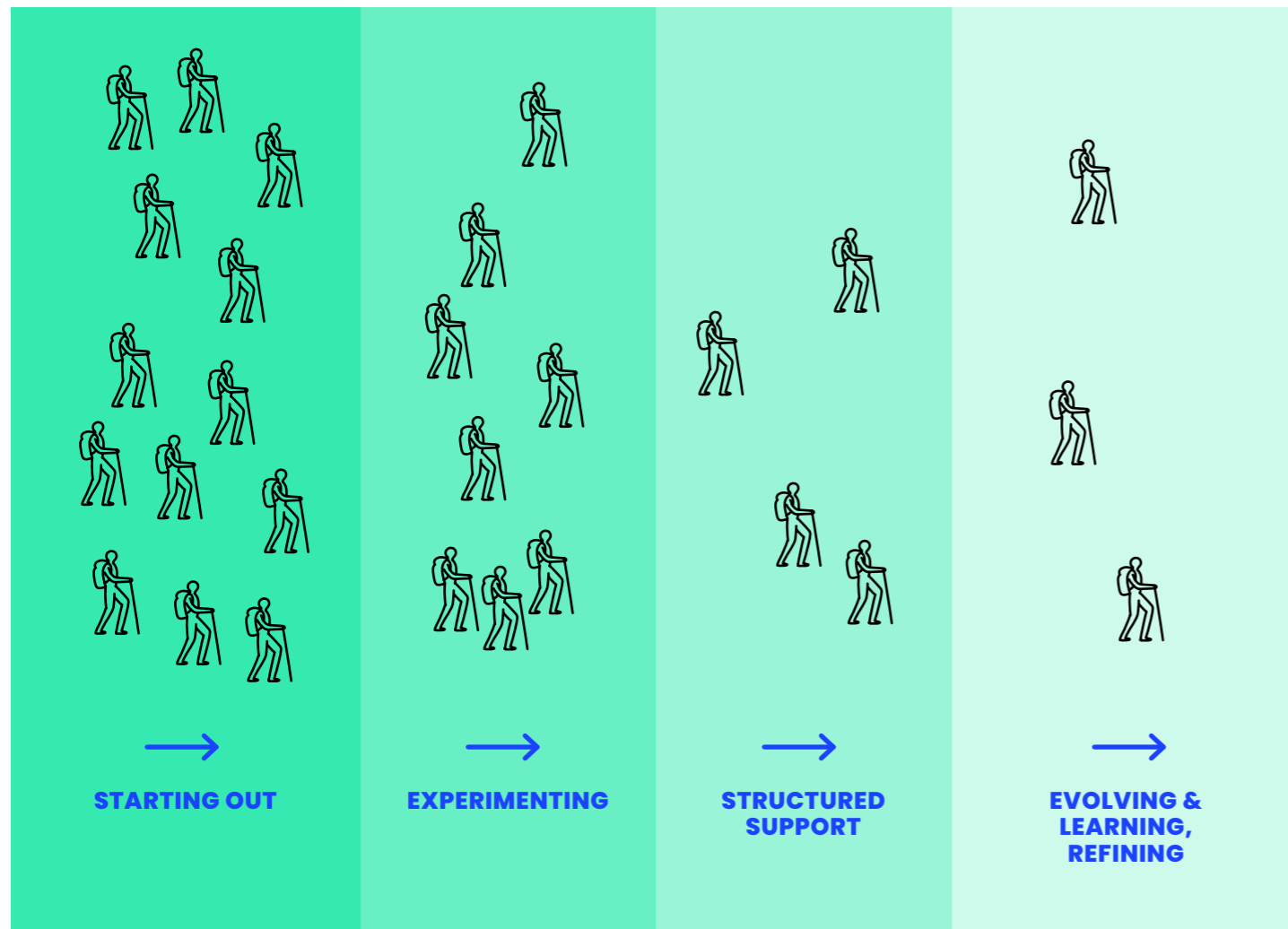




The United Nations experience of supporting scaling

A spectrum of emerging good practice

How widely has the United Nations growing understanding of the importance of scale translated into experimentation to put support into practice? Despite an appreciation of the value of scale and the challenges it poses, very few United Nations entities are experimenting, and only a tiny minority within the United Nations have created structured environments to support it. A handful of frontrunners have established such vehicles and are now climbing the learning curve, evaluating which elements work, and experimenting with alternatives, pivoting towards a stable model for effective scaling support.



“We made a decision that we work with the ones that we think have the strongest potential. That’s why we also have a phased approach.”

— United Nations agency senior innovation manager

One leader is the WFP Innovation Accelerator, which has scaled eight innovations globally since inception in 2015 and which had around 42 active projects at the end of 2020. For example, [WFP’s H2Grow](#) project has made it possible for some 73,000 people in 21 countries to use hydroponics to grow food in “impossible” places.

The UNICEF [“Accelerate to scale”](#) programme supported 90 countries to improve programme results by adapting innovations to their specific contexts, in collaboration with private sector partners, governments, universities and communities. UNDP has established a network of Accelerator Labs, part of whose mission is to grow innovations into full-scale usage. UNHCR has supported nine innovations to scale in different contexts via its [HEA programme](#).

These frontrunners are learning and developing their capabilities – in fact, scaling up scaling support. They are expanding how they source scalable innovations (and from whom), how they enhance the range of support they offer, and how they systematise support so they can replicate their support offering.

The United Nations now is casting a wider net to take advantage of potentially valuable innovations. Within the United Nations system there are many active innovators and a rich variety of solutions which could potentially be scaled and which would benefit from support. But there are also many external innovators with valuable and scalable solutions that could be drawn in and accelerated towards scale. This hybrid approach is increasingly being explored because United Nations agencies understand that opening up the “supply side” can extend the range of solutions it can potentially deploy.

Widen innovation pools and provide specific support mechanisms

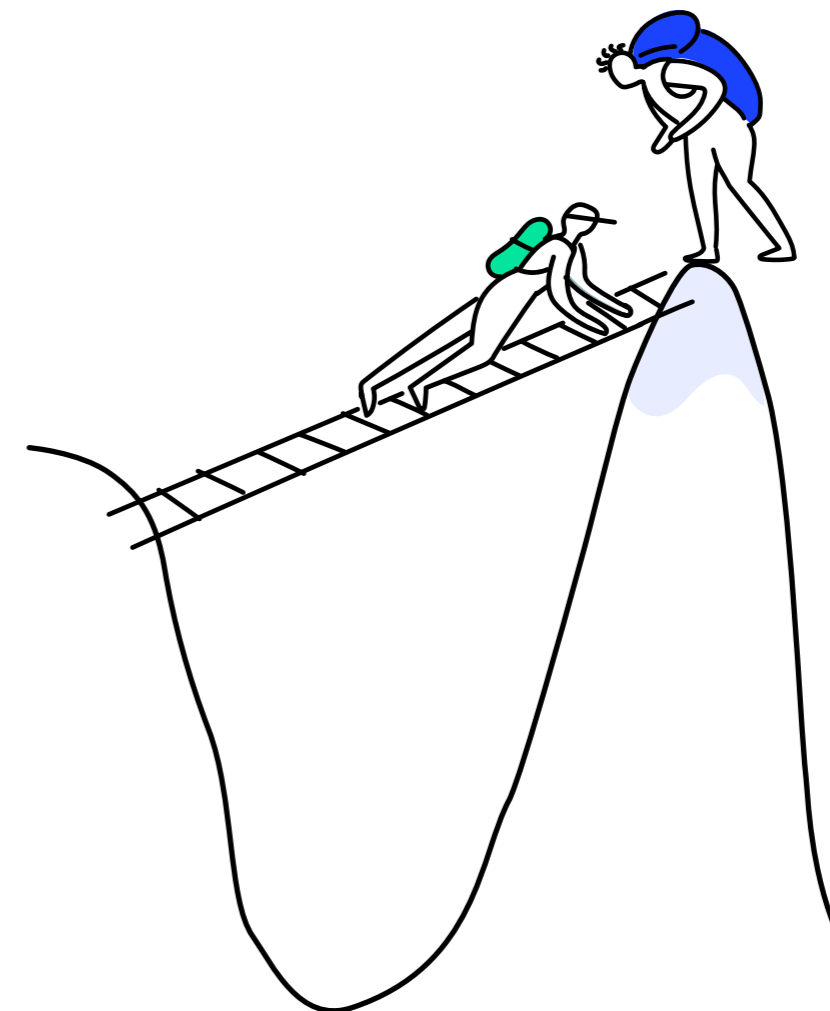
See, for example, [UNDP Digital X](#), which was originally established to find, match, and scale proven and innovative digital solutions around the world. Building on lessons learned from its first version of support, the programme has pivoted to become a matchmaking operation that works with existing accelerators to support its own teams. The Digital X Network now works with a mix of United Nations programmes and accelerators, external accelerators, and foundations to source digital solutions.

Similarly, WHO looks for suitable scalable options and then provides the necessary support to bring them to scale. Still other United Nations entities use a “challenge” approach to broadcast a theme on which they need help and invite applications from established innovators seeking support in scaling their ideas.

In addition to widening the pool of innovations under consideration, the United Nations now understands better how to use specific support mechanisms. Scaling journeys by definition are trips into highly uncertain territory that conventional United Nations funding models are not designed to cope with.

UNFPA in particular has introduced new financing instruments to overcome difficulties in scaling support. Its Equalizer Accelerator Fund, built on lessons learned with its earlier Innovation Fund, aims to use innovation to remove the barriers standing between women and girls and their rights and choices. One way it does that is by providing new funding and finance options for promoting sexual and reproductive health and maternal health, and for reducing gender-based violence.

Monitoring and evaluation processes and metrics also need considerable adaptation to meet the needs of scaling humanitarian innovation. Plugging gaps in evidence and scaling capacity have been central features of the UNHCR HEA, developed over the years since it started in 2016.

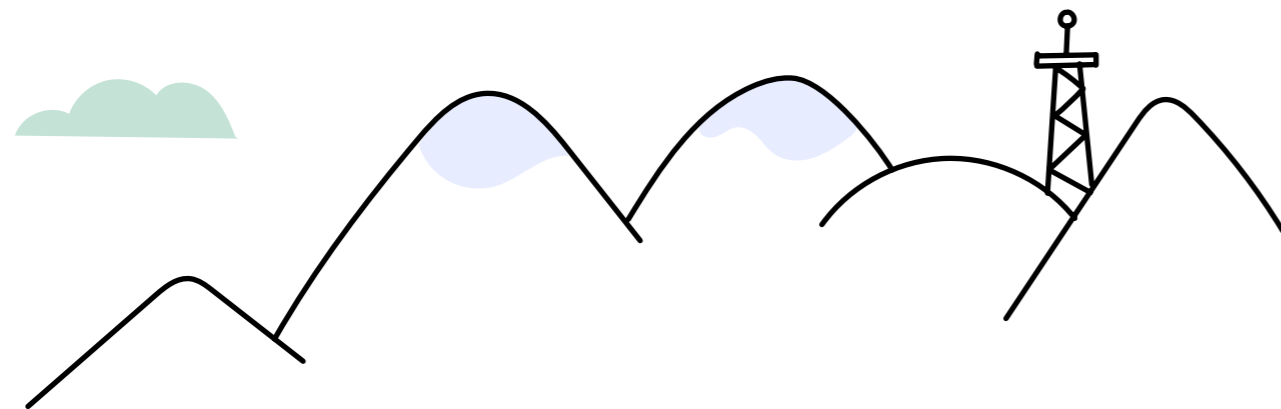


Making support systematic – and offering it as a service

Examples of structured ways of providing scaling support

Fortunately, we have a few beacons of light — examples of structured ways of providing scaling support – to guide us. The United Nations frontrunners all have translated support for scaling into systems. They embed routines in their vehicles so that many groups can navigate the scaling journey.

A 2021 audit of the WFP Accelerator said, for example, that there are “established processes and procedures for sourcing ideas and supporting projects, from developing a business model to providing access to partners network.”¹⁶ It further noted that “project governance and reporting mechanisms were well-documented and consistently implemented, allowing for output measurement and regular progress monitoring.” WFP has a structured “path to scale” framework that identifies key steps and project phases. It has been documented in a systematic fashion that meets [ISO 56000 guidelines](#) for establishing a viable innovation system within organisations.¹⁷

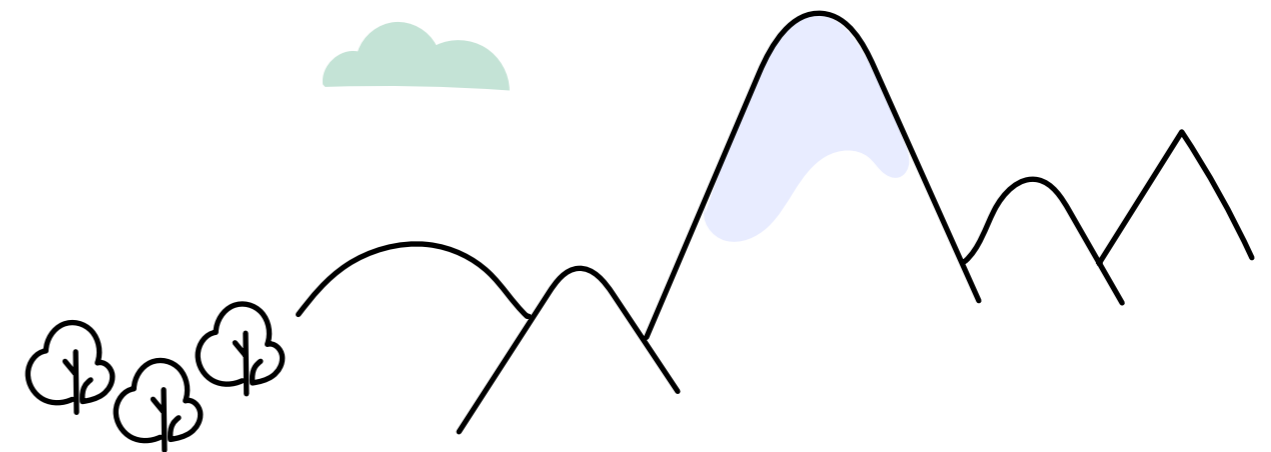


¹⁶ WFP, “Internal Audit of WFP’s Innovation Accelerator”, audit report, AR-21-18, October 2019.

¹⁷ For more on the ISO structured systems model for innovation, see Hyland, J, and others, eds., Changing the Dynamics and Impact of Innovation Management: A Systems Approach and ISO Standard. (Singapore, World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd., 2022).

UNICEF has similarly codified its approach into “Accelerate to scale,” described as “an innovation-enabling advisory service to support innovations to transition to scale.”⁶ Outside the United Nations, a growing number of social innovation agencies have followed a similar pattern of learning, such as the [Humanitarian Innovation Fund](#) with various versions of its “Journey to Scale” support programme.

Now that they’ve learned these lessons and built vehicles to implement them, the frontrunners recognise they have a valuable service offering that can help others. WFP is opening up its accelerator process to manage scaling innovation on behalf of external clients, such as Grand Challenges Canada, a non-profit organisation that funds solutions to health and development issues in the developing world. UNICEF has an internal consultancy offering scaling as a service to its staff and innovation teams which they support.



“If we can create both a mental space, a financial space, a physical space and with greater incentives for groups to innovate and take risks, my sense is that would go a long way.”

- United Nations Resident Coordinator

4

CLOSING THE GAPS

CLOSING THE GAPS

A number of gaps remain, despite growing understanding of the challenge of scaling, and the frontrunners' accomplishments in providing support. Some challenges relate specifically to the provision of scaling support and some concern the broader environment for innovation within the United Nations system.

As we've seen, progress is being made in the United Nations system towards delivering effective support for scaling innovation. Connecting to a wider external community – participating in IDIA, for example, has added to the storehouse of knowledge gained from direct experience. Even so, a number of gaps remain that highlight the needs for strengthening the United Nations capacity to scale innovation.

In particular, more can be done to help innovators surmount the obstacles identified earlier. Support at key stages could be built into a structured system to support many teams ready to scale.

Mechanisms are needed on the “supply side” to:

- Build on routines for supporting innovations to scale that are being pioneered by the frontrunners both within the United Nations system and outside.
- Mentor innovation teams all along the scaling journey, with a particular emphasis on providing the right mentoring at the right time.
- Help innovation teams assemble and work effectively with a network of partners, in anticipation of handing over to people who will implement the innovation once it has scaled.
- Help United Nations innovation teams address key compliance areas relating to internal procurement procedures and legal regulations.
- Investigate and test alternative funding arrangements to provide necessary flexibility for the uncertain world of scaling innovation. Open-ended funding may be needed, but the challenge is to retain responsible accountability while giving more autonomy to innovating teams.
- Develop new metrics for monitoring and evaluation that correspond to the challenges of scaling innovation.
- Increase incentives to encourage moving innovation to scale. This is closely related to structured environments discussed above where people with an entrepreneurial spirit feel they act differently, with the freedom to change direction as their experiments dictate.
- Formally co-ordinate sharing of United Nations bodies' experiences in scaling. Some mechanisms exist, like the [UN Innovation Toolkit](#) to which many agencies have contributed, but there is scope for more to be done. Structured sharing guards against teams having to reinvent the wheel, or not respecting innovations developed outside their own agency.

Gaps in enabling mechanisms

Gaps in framework conditions

Efforts to provide more systematic and effective support

Those are the gaps on the “supply side,” but there are gaps on the “demand side” as well. We now look more closely at the context of innovation inside the United Nations system, and the framework conditions that affect efforts to provide more systematic and effective support for scaling.

How can we close the gaps?

Challenges

- Need for a core framework process to guide scaling – develop ‘routines’ for scaling to enable repeating the trick
- Need for mentorship of various kinds and at various times in scaling lifecycle
- Need for support for innovating teams to find, form and build performing ecosystems for scale
- Need for more flexibility in funding models
- Need for incentives to encourage and enable scaling
- Need for alignment of measurement frameworks and metrics to support scaling

Enabling mechanisms

- Co-create and disseminate a core process model framework and enabling innovation routines
- Enhance range and type of mentorship provision and develop mentoring skills
- Enable via brokering, signposting, endorsing, etc. the development of high performance networks for scale
- Create flexibility within funding processes
- Align and provide incentives for scaling
- Develop monitoring and evaluation processes and metrics to support scale

How can we close the gaps?

Challenges

- Culture mismatch ‘operations’ vs ‘innovation’ in UN
- ‘Space’ to work with innovation – time, physical environment, ‘permission’, experiment, creative collisions, etc.
- Good practice not always shared or accessible
- Learning and development towards ‘mature’ good practices in support – the experience curve
- Need to capture, codify, collate and communicate knowledge around scaling and the enabling toolkit
- Need to share experiences

Framework conditions

- Enable ambidexterity
- Create a (temporay) innovation space / culture – and allow for ‘re-entry’
- Enable more widespread sharing and access
- Facilitate learning in individuals and also embedded in ‘vehicles’ to deliver support
- Create a ‘library’ of knowledge and resources and make it accessible to all
- Create a community of practice

“Are project cycles and funding mechanisms actually conducive for innovation?”

– Consultant with extensive experience working with the United Nations and other aid agencies

Innovation requires different skills, behaviour, structures and processes than those that have enabled the United Nations to deliver services and policy in a safe, ethical and reliable manner.

Many large organisations face the challenge of acting like an ambidextrous person, as discussed earlier, and this challenge must be met if the United Nations is to deliver on its innovation ambition.¹⁸ To become “ambidextrous,” the United Nations has to make sure it has the structures and systems to enable both innovation and its normal functions to operate effectively alongside each other. It also must ensure that innovations do not remain islands, but also become part of the normal way of doing things.

These dual challenges exist at different levels of the United Nations system. Internally, individual agencies need to scale promising innovations in all areas of their mandates, and across all the geographical areas where they operate. Across the entire United Nations system, there’s a need for a system to spread good, scalable ideas across agencies.

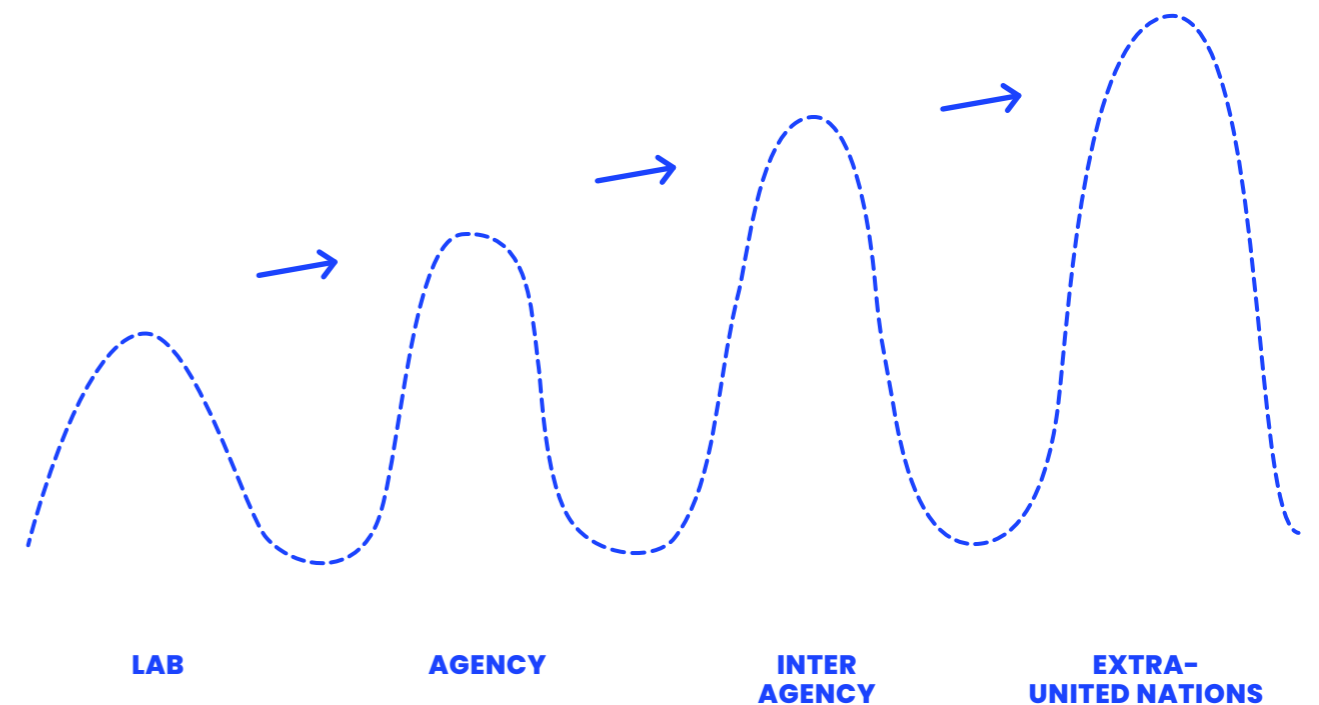
Without better alignment of framework conditions, other targeted efforts, such as structured vehicles for support, threaten to remain islands operating differently from the ocean they sit in.

¹⁸ For example, see: Birkinshaw, J and Gibson, C, “Building ambidexterity into an organization”, MIT Sloan Management Review, vol. 45, no. 4, Art. no. 4 (2004). Charles A and others, “The Ambidextrous Organization”, Harvard Business Review, vol. 82, no. 4, Art. no. 4 (April 2004).

Innovations must become part of the normal way of doing things

The kind of atmosphere that encourages innovation to flourish requires lifting of day-to-day pressures to deliver and an understanding that innovation proceeds at a different pace from most United Nations operations. Innovators need permission to experiment, explore and possibly fail, all key elements of an agile innovation approach. Innovators need to meet lots of people with a wide range of knowledge and experience, and they need a physical location distinct from staff members carrying out day-to-day tasks.

Chasms on the United Nations Scaling Journey



“If you have a tool, maybe we could use it or you could share it with others. You are the best so you could help the others to reach your level, especially the agencies who have no innovation strategy, the small agencies.”
 — United Nations Resident Coordinator

Interviewees stressed the need for creating such spaces, but also emphasized that they should be temporary. They recognise that too much isolation in such environments only increases separation from the mainstream. These spaces should not be regarded by the organisation as “islands where innovation happens.” Instead, it’s essential that they be a way of changing the underlying culture. This means that when designing such spaces, it’s also important to consider the re-entry process after the space has served its purpose.

To support the push to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) — integrated goals to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity, the United Nations has worked with 14 country teams (representatives of United Nations agencies within countries) around the world.

These SDG Leadership Labs were praised by many interviewed for this report because they provide space for Resident Coordinators and other United Nations leaders to work through how to speed up progress to achieve the goals by 2030. One praised the labs as a way to break down silos and reconnect with personal motivation for working for the United Nations, while others were concerned about how to maintain the momentum and build this kind of approach into daily operations.¹⁹

¹⁹ Buell, B and Srivastava, M, “SDG Leadership Labs: Leading Transformative Change in the United Nations”, 2019. Available at: <https://medium.com/presencing-institute-blog/sdg-leadership-labs-leading-transformative-change-in-the-united-nations-e41c35bc82>.

Other framework issues that need to be addressed are:

- **How to share good practice.**
 The United Nations should make it a priority to diffuse knowledge the frontrunners have built about using structured environments to foster innovation.
 These agencies’ priority is to focus on their own activities, and they may not be able, individually, to commit to extensive external diffusion.
 A cross-mandate agency could capture and share these experiences.
- **Enhance overall innovation management capability in the United Nations** by recruiting people with innovation skills and improving training (by wider use of the UN Innovation Toolkit and other measures).
- **Explore recent work by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) on innovation management.**
 It recommends a systematic approach to innovation and also specifies the skills needed by individuals who will play a part in that system.
- **Strengthen the “demand side”.**
 Why are United Nations managers and staff members not making better use of tools and structures that already exist to support innovation? We need to better understand whether United Nations employees have an innovative approach and whether incentives exist to encourage their entrepreneurship.
- **Knowledge gained across the United Nations system about how to support innovation scaling needs to be captured, codified and made available** as structures and tools.
 Translating knowledge into action requires some kind of knowledge management hub, possibly under the UN Innovation Network (UNIN).
- **Strengthen and expand communities of practice** to exchange experience and diffuse good practice.
 Build on work already being done by UNIN and/or link with interested external agencies who share the challenge of supporting innovation to scale.

“It’s not just one agency or another... We’re all in it together. How do we work together better?”

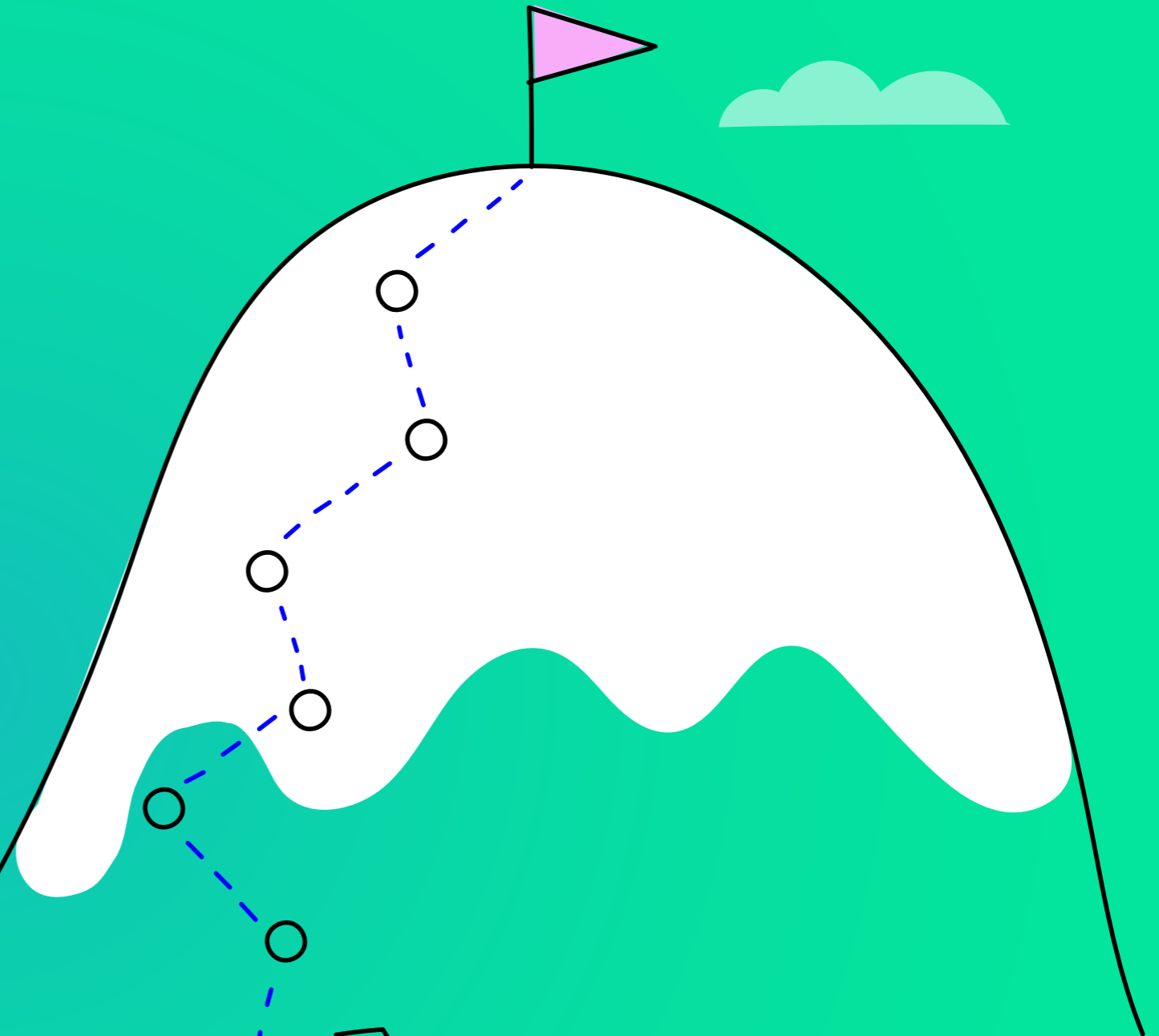
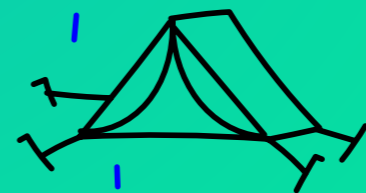
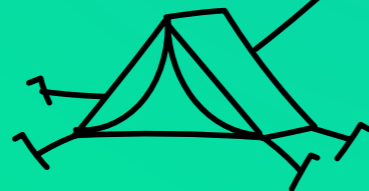
— United Nations Resident Coordinator

5

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Deepen** current good practice, further invest in and reinforce existing United Nations-wide support.
- **Broaden** scale support for all United Nations agencies to cut down on duplication, particularly by creating a UNGP Scale Catalyst.
- **Expand** the vision and horizons of the United Nations and its innovation capabilities to enable the scaling of innovation required to truly transform the United Nations system.



Deepen – Recommendations for the wider United Nations system

Establish an observatory to detect useful scaling information

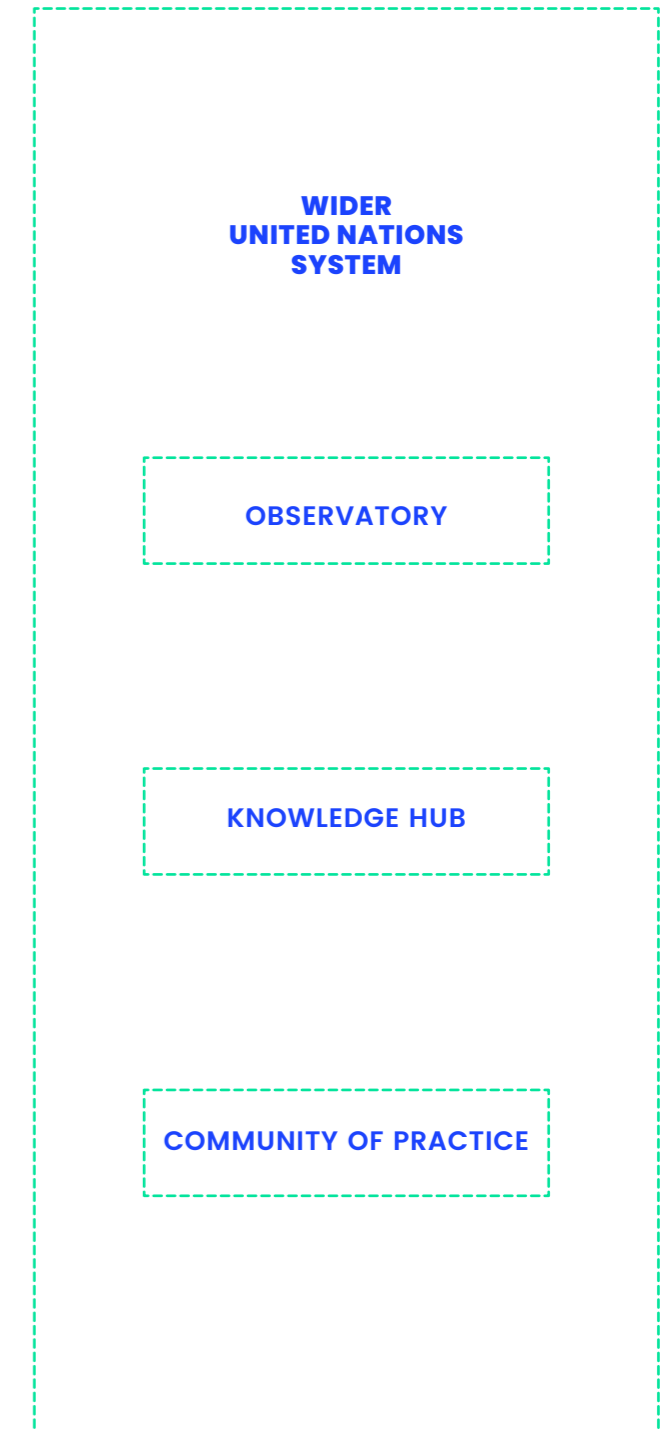
- Build on the work of UNIN and others to capture and share promising insights about the challenge of scaling.
- A United Nations “observatory” would scan both public and private sectors for knowledge and experience on how to support scaling. The signals detected from many sources could be disseminated widely through the United Nations system to capitalise on its own experiments and to deploy promising practices as early as possible.
- An observatory could also identify gaps and “dark spaces” where further research might usefully be commissioned to help improve overall understanding of the scale challenge and potential support solutions.

Establish a knowledge hub to scale innovation

- Develop a knowledge hub to act as a library of experiences, gathering case studies, insights, tools and techniques for scaling innovations.
- Build on the UN Innovation Toolkit and training and development programmes from agencies like UNIN and UNSSC.
- Tap into extensive agency level experience and make it widely available (see “Broaden” section below for how UNGP might also contribute to do this as part of its mission to support cross-agency innovation).
- Collect, codify and curate knowledge about how to deal with the challenge of scaling, drawing on insights both from within the United Nations system and from further afield.
- As a high priority, convert this knowledge into tools and mechanisms and make them available in practical form as widely as possible.

Formalise a community of practice around scaling innovation

- Build on the informal existing network to create a formal community of practice to accelerate adoption and diffusion of good practices in scaling innovation. UNIN has already created some of this structure.
- A formal community of practice could be enhanced by regular communication and experience sharing, including a website, workshops and a United Nations innovation conference to bring the community together periodically to share experiences.



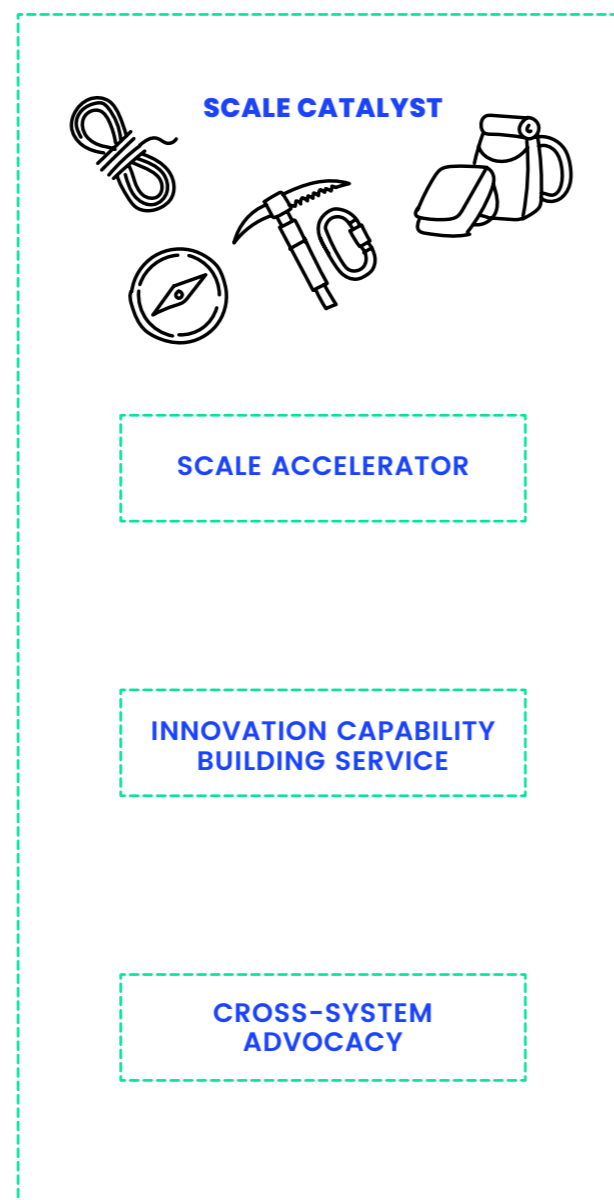
Broaden – Support for the United Nations

Establish catalytic support that would address the significant challenges for innovation that still exist within the United Nations system.

- Many agencies lack innovation capabilities.
- Some programmes are not in a position to support adoption and scaling of innovations even within their own agencies.
- The move to scale is limited by inadequate cross-agency adoption of innovations within the United Nations.
- Innovations are still not being adopted outside the United Nations at the desired rate.

With a focus on using innovation to advance the United Nations Secretary-General's new goals for the world, UNGP has been uniquely positioned to support innovations in their journey to scale. Through its work, UNGP is creating a **Scale Catalyst** that would support innovations to span chasms on the United Nations scaling journey to maximise their impact globally – moving from experimentation in labs to implementation by individual agencies, then to adoption by many agencies and on to external partners.

The Scale Catalyst would have three components: a scale accelerator, an innovation capability building service, and an advocacy role.



Create a scale accelerator

- Establish a United Nations system-wide scale acceleration service. Accelerator vehicles provide a structured process for scaling innovations. The accelerator would offer a wider range of support for teams to develop and implement scaling strategies for their innovations.
- Drawing inspiration from the SDG Leadership Labs, a system-wide scale acceleration service operated by UNGP as a service for the United Nations system would be a more efficient way of enabling cross collaboration and avoiding duplication of efforts.

"I would very much think there is room for a capacity builder in this area which could work with the various actors involved in making scaling happen...A knowledge hub in a way that could support various actors that are struggling on this front."

– Senior manager, donor funding agency.

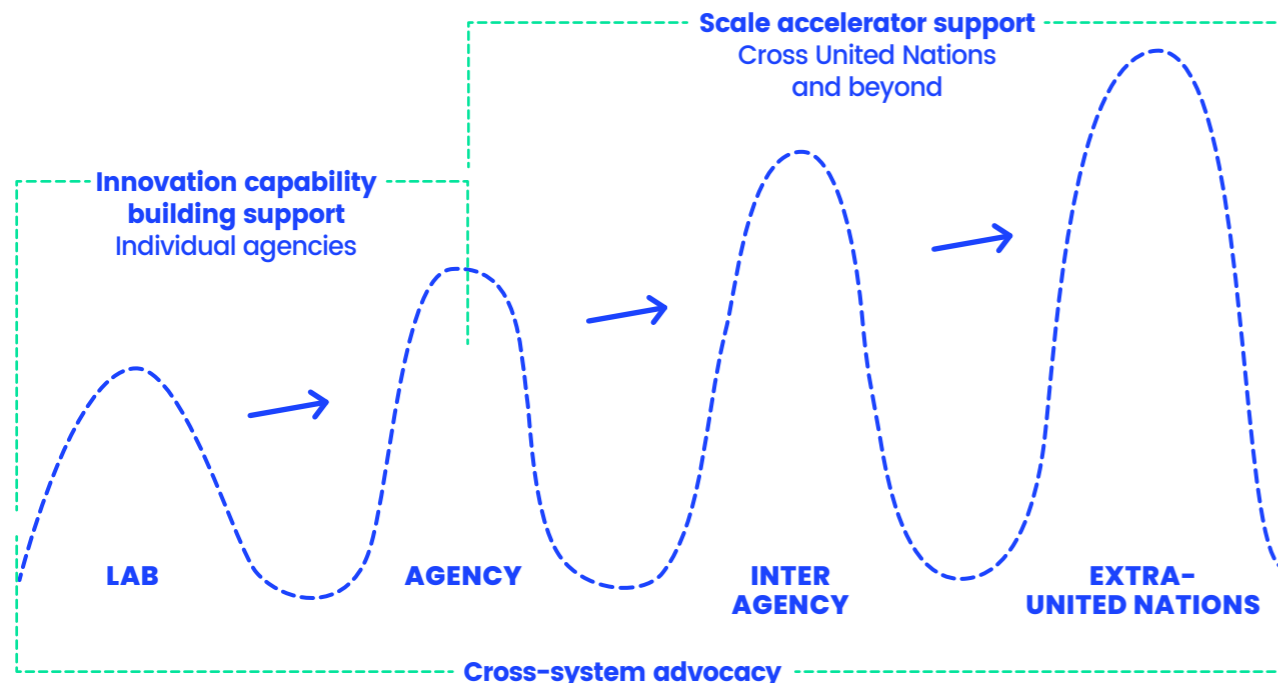
Create an innovation capability building service

- A challenge for the United Nations is to have innovation functions (such as labs) that support mainstreaming of innovation in parent agencies.
- The key to addressing this is to develop innovation capabilities that will provide structured processes for innovation to be mainstreamed within the agencies
- UNGP would create an innovation capability building service that provides bespoke support and advice, resulting in innovation functions that will be unique to each agency.

Amplify cross-system advocacy

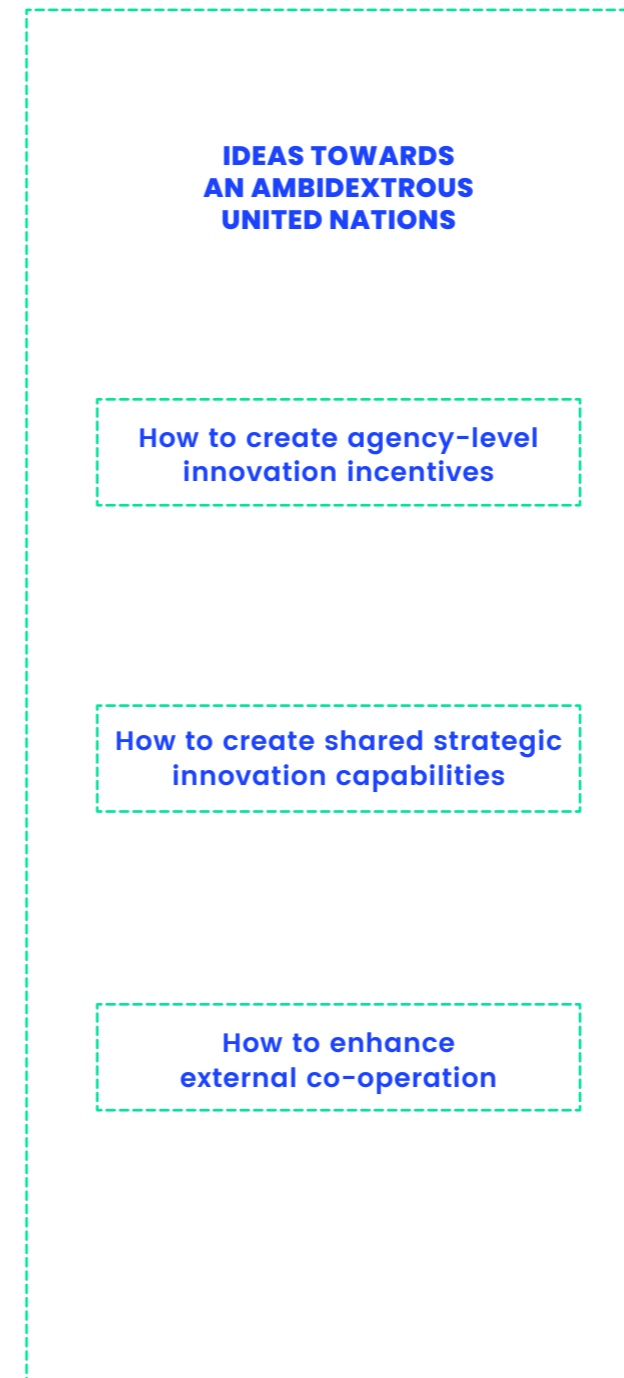
- Bolster the work of UNIN and build on the work UNGP has already begun in supporting cross-system collaboration to improve the adoption of innovations more widely among United Nations agencies. This would also help scale innovations beyond the United Nations system into Member States and across other partners.
- UNGP, together with UNIN, can function as a bridge and broker for networking across the system to enable good practice on scaling to be shared more effectively across agencies and across mandates.
- Increase United Nations staff members' and managers' understanding of how innovation works; help them develop a more entrepreneurial aptitude.
- Explore new methods and approaches to collaborative monitoring and evaluation.

Chasms on the United Nations Scaling Journey



Expand – Innovation capabilities to transform the United Nations system

Where does the United Nations go from here?



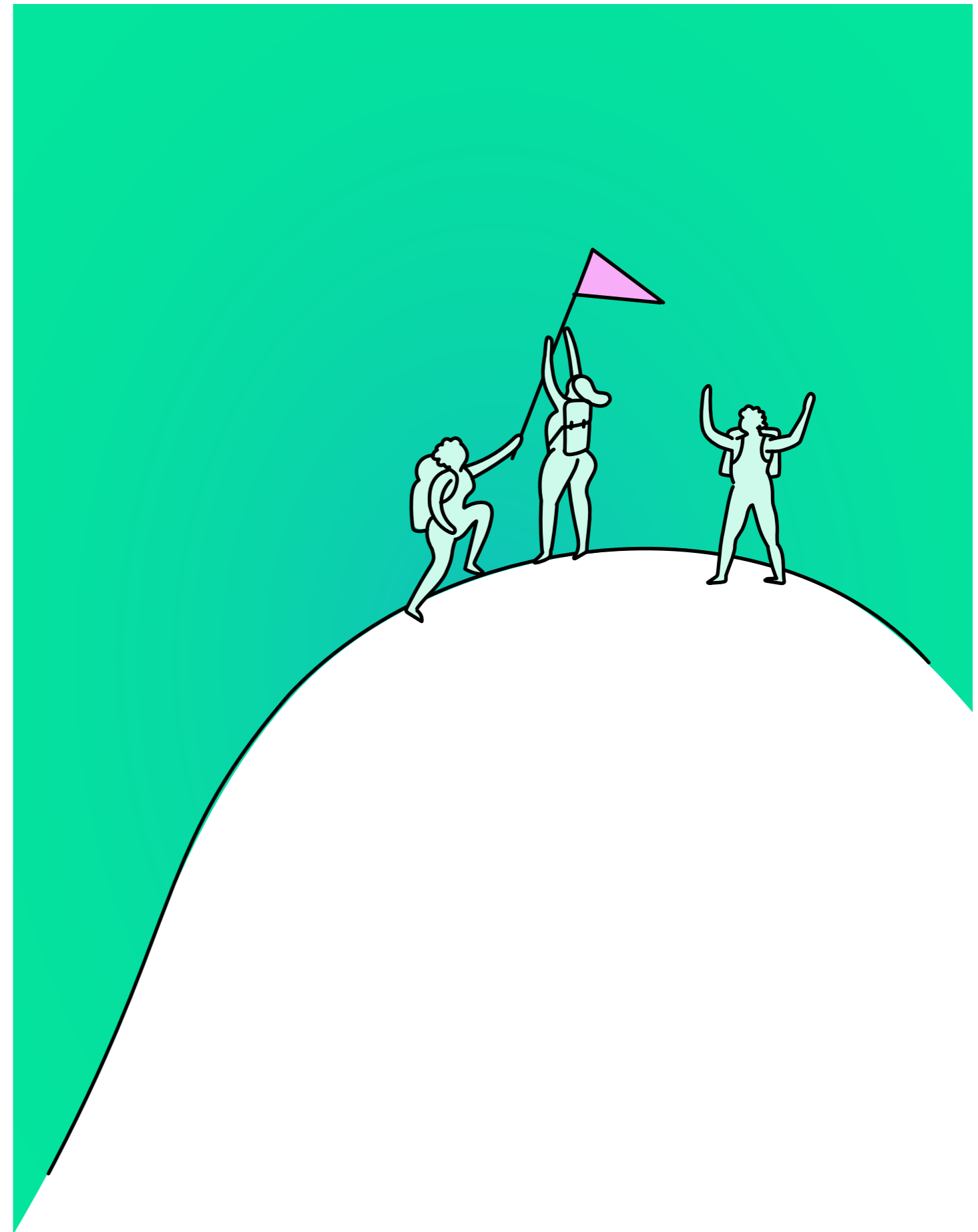
The push to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity through 17 interlinked goals known as the SDGs has catalysed interest in innovation inside and outside the United Nations. This could offer scope for the United Nations to take a leading role in innovation, acting as a co-ordinating platform and orchestrating a wider ecosystem towards social innovation.

It is clear that even full implementation of the Deepen and Broaden recommendations above would pay only limited dividends if conducted within the existing United Nations framework, where innovation is not the norm. Transforming United Nations culture is a huge challenge, but many other large organisations have met the challenge, so there are many role models that might serve as guides.

Changing United Nations culture would be a long-term project and would require closer examination of issues such as creating space for innovation, flexible funding, recruiting people with innovation skills, staff development, use of incentives, more relevant metrics, and even how much bureaucracy the United Nations really needs (the concept of Minimum Viable Bureaucracy).

Outside the original scope of this report, we offer the following recommendations to improve the ability of the United Nations system to innovate while also reliably delivering its regular programmes.

- The proposed UNGP Scale Catalyst could co-ordinate exploration of these processes with a group of like-minded United Nations agencies, alongside UNIN and with support of the Executive Office of the Secretary-General.
- The United Nations could benchmark itself against the emerging ISO good practice model of an innovation system.
- Allocate a shared budget for innovation that could promote core themes, like scaling, in addition to efforts within individual agencies.
- Consider creation of a new United Nations venture to incubate and grow innovations before scaling them through United Nations agencies or offering them to Member States and others.
- Enhance cooperation with outside organisations, through joint funding or other arrangements, to provide innovations to address major challenges and ecosystem building.

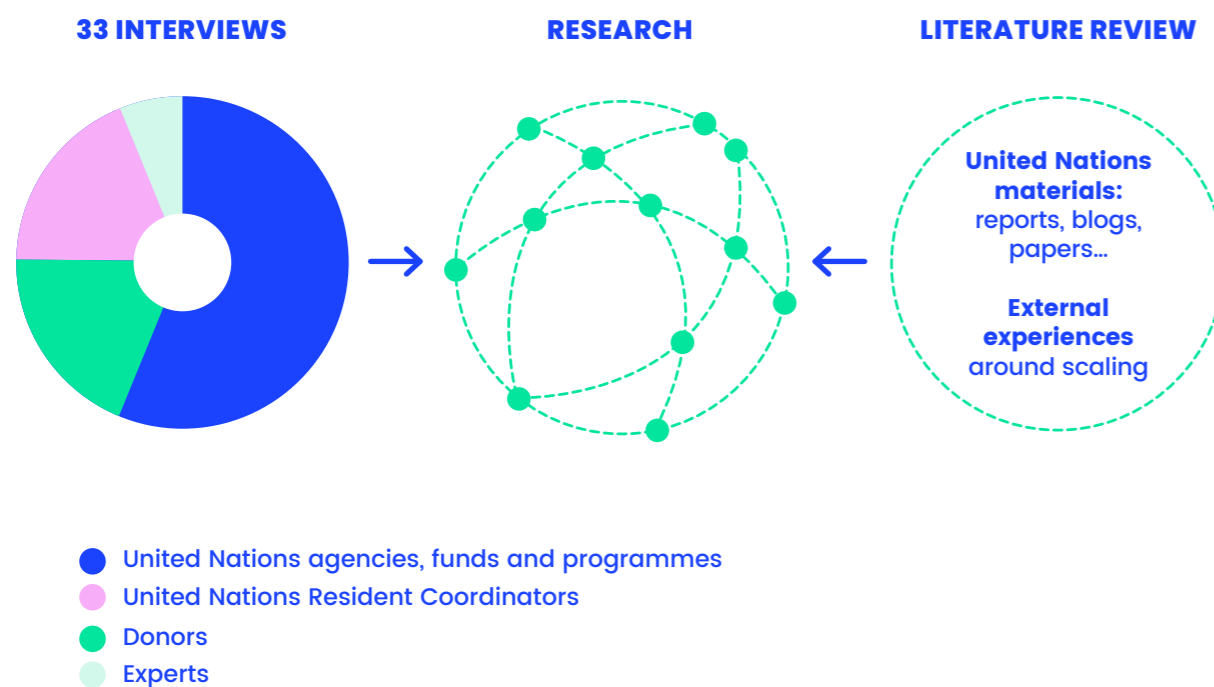


6

ANNEX

Methodology

Literature review and research This report is based on a literature review and interviews with 33 people linked to the United Nations system who have varying perspectives on the scaling challenge. Literature reviewed included reports, papers and books as well as blogs and online articles. The 33 interview subjects are United Nations innovators, United Nations “clients” of innovation, donors and outside experts. The first interview subjects were found via UNIN; they in turn pinpointed other possible interview subjects with relevant insights and information. The findings were validated through another round of presentations and discussion with interviewees.



Acronyms

- GIZ** Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH or the German Agency for International Cooperation GmbH
- HEA** Humanitarian Education Accelerator
- IDIA** International Development Innovation Alliance
- IFAD** International Fund for Agricultural Development
- ISO** International Organization for Standardization
- SDGs** Sustainable Development Goals
- UNDP** United Nations Development Programme
- UNFPA** United Nations Population Fund
- UNGP** UN Global Pulse
- UNHCR** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- UNICEF** United Nations Children’s Fund
- UNIN** UN Innovation Network
- UNSSC** United Nations System Staff College
- WFP** World Food Programme

With contributions from colleagues who participated in this research, and gave their time and insights to inform this work:

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH / German Agency for International Cooperation GmbH, including BMZ digilab, the Digital for Development (D4D) Hub, the Smart Development Fund and their external consultants

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad)

Presencing Institute

Ulkoministeriö / Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

UN Innovation Network (UNIN)

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

United Nations Department of Operational Support (DOS)

United Nations Development Coordination Office (UNDCO)

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)

United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR)

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

United Nations Resident Coordinators and their respective offices

United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC)

World Food Programme (WFP)

World Health Organization (WHO)